

NAN of MUSIC MOUNTAIN

By Frank H. Spearman
Author of Whispering Smith

CHAPTER XXVII.
—17—
Hope Forlorn.

There were hours in that night that each had reason long to remember; a night that seemed to bring them, in spite of their devotion, to the end of their dream. They parted late, each trying to soften the blow as it fell on the other, each professing a courage which, in the face of the revelation, neither could clearly feel.

In the morning Jeffries brought down to De Spain, who had spent a sleepless night at the office, a letter from Nan.

De Spain opened it with acute misgivings. Hardly able to believe his eyes, he slowly read:

Dearest—A wild hope has come to me. Perhaps we don't know the truth of this terrible story as it really is. Suppose we should be condemning poor Uncle Duke without having the real facts? Suppose we were a witch, Henry, if ever one lived—a curse to everyone. What purpose he could serve by repeating this story, which he must have kept very secret till now, I don't know; but there was some reason. I must know the whole truth—I feel that I alone can get hold of it, and that you would approve what I am doing if you were here with me in this little room, where I am writing at daybreak, to show you my heart.

Long before you get this I shall be speeding toward the gap. I am going to Uncle Duke to get from him the exact truth. Uncle Duke is breaking—has broken—and now that the worst has come, and we must face it, he will tell me what I ask. Whether I can get him to repeat this to you, to come to you, to throw himself on your pity, my dearest one, I don't know. But it is for this I am going to try, and for this I beg of your love—the love of which I have been so proud—that you will let me stay with him until I at least learn everything and can bring the whole story to you. If I can bring him, I will.

And I shall be safe with him—perfectly safe. Gale has been driven away. Pardaloe, I know I can trust, and he will be under the roof with me. Please do not try to come to me. It might ruin everything. Only forgive me, and I shall be back with what I hope for, or what I fear, very, very soon. Not till then can I bear to look into your eyes. You have a better right than anyone in the world to know the whole truth, cost what it may. Be patient for only a little while with me.

It was Jeffries who said, afterward, he hoped never again to be the bearer of a letter such as that. Never until he had read and grasped the contents of Nan's note had Jeffries seen the bundle of resource and nerve and snow, that men called Henry de Spain, go to pieces. For once, trouble overbore him.

When he was able to speak he told Jeffries everything. "It is my fault," he said hopelessly. "I was so crippled, so stunned, she must have thought—I see it now—that I was making ready to ride out by daylight and shoot Duke down on sight. It's the price a man must pay, Jeffries, for the ability to defend himself against this bunch of holdup men and assassins. Because they can't get me, I'm a 'gunman'—"

"No, you're not a 'gunman'." "A gunman and nothing else. That's what everybody, friends and enemies, reckon me—a gunman. You put me here to clean out this Calabasas gang, not because of my good looks, but because I've been, so far, a fraction of a second quicker on a trigger than these double-d—d crooks."

Jeffries, from behind his pipe, regarded De Spain's random talk calmly. "I do feel hard over my father's death," he went on moodily. "Who wouldn't? If God meant me to forget it, why did he put this mark on my face, Jeff? I did talk pretty strong to Nan about it on Music Mountain."

"I did feel, for a long time, I'd like to kill with my own hands the man that murdered my father, Jeff. My mother must have realized that her babe, if a man-child, was doomed to a life of bloodshed. I've been trying to think most of the night what she'd want me to do now. I don't know what I can do, or can't do, when I set eyes on the old scoundrel. He's got to tell the truth—that's all I say now. If he lies, after what he made my mother suffer, he ought to die like a dog—no matter who he is."

"I don't want to break Nan's heart. What can I do? Hanging him here in Sleepy Cat, if I could do it, wouldn't help her feelings a whole lot. If I could see the fellow—" De Spain's hands spread before him on the table, drew up tight. "If I could get my fingers on his throat, for a minute, and talk to him, tell him what I think of him—I might know what I would want to do—Nan might be there to see and judge between us. I'd be almost willing to leave things to her to settle herself. I only want what's right. But, the oath that recorded his closing threat was collected and pitiless, 'if any harm comes to that girl now from this wild trip back among those wolves—God pity the men that put it over. I'll wipe out the whole accursed clan. If I have to swing for it right here in Sleepy Cat!'"

John Lefferer, Jeffries, Scott in turn took him in hand to hold him during three days, to restrain the fury of his resentment, and keep him from riding to the gap in a temper that each of them knew would mean only a tragedy worse than that had gone before. Even three days of tactful representation and patient admonition from cool-

headed counselors did not accomplish all they hoped for in De Spain's attitude. His rage subsided, but only to be followed by a settled gloom that they knew might burst into uncontrollable anger at any moment.

A report reached McAlpin that Gale Morgan was making ready to return to Music Mountain with the remnant of Sandusky's gang, to make a demand on Duke for certain property and partnership adjustments. This rumor he telephoned to Jeffries. Before talking with De Spain, Jeffries went over the information with Lefferer. The two agreed it was right, in the circumstances, that De Spain should be nearer than Sleepy Cat to Nan. Moreover, the period of waiting she had enjoined on him was almost complete.

Without giving De Spain the story fully, the two men talking before him let the discussion drift toward a proposal on his part to go down to Calabasas, where he could more easily keep track of any movement to or from the gap, and this they approved. De Spain, already chafing under a hardly endured restraint, lost no time in starting for Calabasas, directing Lefferer to follow next day.

It added nothing to his peace of mind in the morning to learn definitely from McAlpin that Gale Morgan, within twenty-four hours, had really disappeared from Calabasas. No word of any kind had come from Music Mountain for days. No one at Calabasas was aware even that Nan had gone into the gap again. Bob Scott was at Thief River. De Spain telephoned to him to come upon the early stage, and turned his attention toward getting information from Music Mountain without violating Nan's injunction not to frustrate her most delicate effort with her uncle.

As a possible scout to look into her present situation and report on it, McAlpin could point only to Bull Page. Bull was a ready instrument, but his present value as an assistant had become a matter of doubt, since practically every man in the gap had threatened within the week to blow his head off—though Bull himself felt no scruples against making an attempt to reach Music Mountain and get back again. It was proposed by the canny McAlpin to send him in with a team and light wagon, ostensibly to bring out his trunk, which, if it had not been fed to the horses, was still in Duke's barn. As soon as a rig could be got up Page started out.

It was late November. A far, clear air drew the snow-capped ranges sharply down to the eye of the desert—as if the speckless sky, lighted by the radiant sun, were but a monster glass rigged to trick the credulous retina. De Spain, in the saddle in front of the barn, his broad hat brim set on the impassive level of the western horseman, his lips seeming to compress his thoughts, his lines over his forehead, and his hands half-slipped into the pockets of his snug leather coat, watched Page with his light wagon and horses drive away.

Idling around the neighborhood of the barn in the saddle, De Spain saw him gradually recede into the low desert perspective, the perspective which almost alone enabled the watcher to realize as he curtailed his eyes behind their long, steady lashes from the blaring sun, that it was a good bit of a way to the foot of the great outpost of the Superstition range.

De Spain's restlessness prevented his remaining quietly anywhere for long. As the morning advanced he entered out on the Music Mountain trail, thinking of and wishing for a sight of Nan. The deadly shock of Pardaloe's story had been dulled by days and nights of pain. His deep-rooted love and his loneliness had quieted his impulse for vengeance and overborne him with a profound sadness. He realized how different his feelings were now from what they had been when she knelt before him in the darkened room and, not daring to plead for mercy for her uncle, had asked him only for the pity for her life that he had seemed so slow to give. Something reproached him now for his coldness at the moment that he should have thought of her suffering before his own.

It was while riding in this way that his eyes, reading mechanically the wagon trail he was aimlessly following—*for no reason other than that it brought him, though far from him, a little closer to her*—arrested his attention. He checked his horse. Something the trail told him, had impressed—Page had stopped his horses. Page had met two men on horseback coming from the gap. After a parley for the horses had tramped around long enough for one—the wagon had turned completely from the trail and struck across the desert, north; the two horsemen, or one with a led horse, had started back for the gap.

All of this De Spain gathered without moving his horse outside a circle of stony rock. What did it mean? Page might have fallen in with crooks from the gap, abandoned his job, and started for Sleepy Cat, but this was unlikely. He might have encountered spies, been pointedly advised to keep away from the gap, and pretended to

start for Sleepy Cat, to avoid trouble with them. Deeming the second the more probable conclusion, De Spain, absorbed in his speculations, continued toward the gap to see whether he could not pick up the trail of Page's rig further on.

Within a mile a further surprise awaited him. The two horsemen, who had headed for the gap after stopping Page, had left the trail, turned to the south, down a small draw, which would screen them from sight, and set out across the desert.

No trail and no habitation lay in the direction they had taken—and it seemed clearer to De Spain that the second horse was a led horse. There was a story in the incident, but his interest lay in following Page's movements, and he spurred swiftly forward to see whether his messenger had resumed the gap trail and gone on with his mission. He followed this quest almost to the mountains, without recovering any trace of Page's rig. He halted. It was certain now that Page had not gone into the gap.

Perplexed and annoyed, De Spain, from the high ground on which he sat his horse, cast his eyes far over the desert. The brilliant sunshine flooded it as far as the eye could reach. He scanned the vast space without detecting a sign of life anywhere, though none better than he knew that any abundance of it might be there. But his gaze caught something of interest on the farthest northern horizon, and on this his scrutiny rested a long time. A soft brown curtain rose just above the earth line against the blue sky. Toward the east it died away and toward the west it was cut off by the Superstition peaks.

De Spain, without giving the weather signs much thought, recognized their import, but his mind was filled with his own anxieties and he rode smartly back toward Calabasas, because he was not at ease over the puzzles in the trail. When he reached the depression where the horsemen had, without any apparent reason, turned south, he halted. Should he follow them or turn back to follow Page's wanderings? If Page had been scared away from the gap for a time, he probably had no information that De Spain wanted, and De Spain knew his cunning and persistence well enough to be confident he would be back on the gap road, and within the cover of the mountains, before a storm should overtake him. On the north the brown curtain had risen fast and already enveloped the farthest peaks of the range. Letting his horse stretch its neck, he hesitated a moment longer trying to decide whether to follow the men to the south or the wagon to the north. A woman might have done better. But no good angel was there to guide his decision, and in another moment he was riding rapidly to the south with the even, brown, misty cloud behind him rolling higher into the northern sky.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

De Spain Rides Alone.

He had hidden the trail but a short time when it led him in a wide angle backward and around toward Calabasas and he found, presently, that the men he was riding after were apparently heading for the stage barns. In the north the rising curtain had darkened. Toward Sleepy Cat the landscape was already obliterated. In the south the sun shone, but the air had grown suddenly cold, and in the sharp drop De Spain realized what was coming. His first thought was of the southern stages, which must be warned, and as he galloped up to big barn, with this thought in mind he saw, standing in the doorway, Bull Page.

De Spain regarded him with astonishment. "How did you get here?" was his sharp question. Page grinned. "Got what I was after, and c'm' back sooner 'I expected. Half-way over to the gap, I met Duke and the young gal on horseback, headed for Calabasas. They pulled up. I pulled up. Old Duke looked kind of excited, and it seemed like Nan was in a considerable hurry to get to Sleepy Cat with him, and he couldn't stand the saddle. Anyway, they were heading for Calabasas to get a rig from McAlpin. I knowed McAlpin would never give old Duke a rig, not if he was a-dyin' in the saddle."

"They're got your rig?" cried De Spain.

"The gal asked me if I'd mind accommodatin' 'em," explained Bull deprecatingly, "to save time."

"They headed north?" exclaimed De Spain. The light from the fast-changing sky fell copper-colored across his horse and figure. McAlpin, followed by a hostler, appeared at the barn door. Bull nodded to De Spain. "Said they wanted to get there quick. She figgered on savin' a few miles by strikin' the trail in. So I takes their horses and let 'em I was headin' for the gap. When they got out of sight, I turned round—"

Even as he spoke, the swift-rolling curtain of mist overhead blotted the sun out of the sky.

De Spain sprang from his saddle with a ringing order to McAlpin. "Get up a fresh saddle-horse!"

"A horse?" cried the startled barn boss, whirling on the hostler. "The strongest legs in the stable, and don't lose a second! Lady Jane; up with her!" he yelled, bellowing his orders into the echoing barn with his hands to his mouth. "Up with her for Mr. de Spain! A second! Marmon! Becker! Lanson! What in h— are you all doing?" he roared, rushing back with a fusillade of oaths. "Look alive, everybody!"

"Coming!" yelled one voice after another from the depths of the distant stalls.

De Spain ran into the office. Page caught his horse, stripped the ride

from his holster, and hurriedly began uncinching. Hostlers running through the barn called shrilly back and forth, and De Spain springing up the stairs toward his room provided what he wanted for his hurried flight. When he dashed down with coats on his arm the hoofs of Lady Jane were clattering down the long gangway. A stable-boy slid from her back on one side as Bull Page threw the saddle across her from the other; hostlers caught at the cinches, while others hurriedly rubbed the legs of the quivering mare. De Spain, his hand on McAlpin's shoulder, was giving his parting injunctions, and the barn boss, head cocked down, and eyes cast furtively on the scattering snowflakes outside, was listening with an attention that recorded indelibly every uttered syllable.

Once only, he interrupted: "Henry, you're ridin' out into this thing alone—don't do it."

"I can't help it," snapped De Spain impatiently.

"It's a man-killer."

"I can't help it."

"Bob Scott, if he's here, 'ud never let you do it. I'll ride w' ye myself. Henry, I worked for your father—"

"You're too old a man, Jim—"

"Henry—"

"Don't talk to me! Do as I tell you!" thundered De Spain.

McAlpin bowed his head. "Ready!" yelled Page, buckling the ride holster in place. Still talking, and with McAlpin glued to his elbow, De Spain vaulted into the saddle, caught the lines from Bull's hands, and steeled the Lady as she sidestepped nervously—McAlpin following close and dodging the dancing hoofs as he looked earnestly up to catch the last word. De Spain touched the horse with the lines. She leaped through the doorway and he raised a backward hand to those behind. Running outside the door, they yelled a chorus of cries after the swift-moving horseman, and, clustered in an excited group, watched the Lady with a dozen great strides round the Calabasas trail and disappear with her rider into the whirling snow.

She fell at once into an easy reaching step, and De Spain, busy with his reflections, hardly gave thought to what she was doing, and little more to what was going on about him.

No moving figure reflects the impressive more than a horseman of the mountains, on a long ride. Though never so swift-borne, the man, looking neither to the right nor to the left, moving evenly and statuelike against the sky, a part of the very beast under him, presents the very picture of indifference to the world around him. The great swift wind spreading over the desert emptied on it snow-laden puffs that whirled and wrapped a cloud of flakes about horse and rider in the symbol of a shroud. De Spain gave no heed to these skirmishing eddies, but he knew what was behind them, and for the wind, he only wished it might keep the snow in the air till he caught sight of Nan.

The even reach of the horse brought him to the point where Nan had changed to the stage wagon. Without a break in her long stride, Lady Jane took the hint of her swerving rider, put her nose into the wind, and headed north. De Spain, alive to the difficulties of his venture, set his hat lower and bent forward to follow the wagon along the sand. With the first of the white furies passed, he found himself in a snarl-less pocket, as it were, of the advancing storm. He hoped for nothing from the prospect ahead; but every moment of respite from the blinding whirl was a gain, and with his eyes close on the trail that had carried Nan into danger, he urged the Lady on.

When the snow again closed down about him he calculated from the roughness of the country that he should be within a mile of the road that Nan was trying to reach, from the gap to Sleepy Cat. But the broken ground straight ahead would prevent her from driving directly to it. He knew she must hold to the right, and her curving track, now becoming difficult to trail, confirmed his conclusion.

A fresh drive of the wind buffeted him as he turned directly north. Only at intervals could he see any trace of the wagon wheels. The driving snow compelled him more than once to dismount and search for the trail. Each time he lost it the effort to regain it was more prolonged. At times he was compelled to ride the desert in wide circles to find the tracks, and this cost time when minutes might mean life. But as long as he could he clung to the struggle to track her exactly. He saw almost where the storm had struck the two wayfarers. Neither, he knew, was insensible to its dangers. What amazed him was that a man like Duke Morgan should be out in it. He found a spot where they had halted and, with a start that checked the beating of his heart, his eyes fell on her footprint not yet obliterated, beside the wagon track.

The sight of it was an electric shock. Throwing himself from his horse, he knelt over it in the storm, oblivious for an instant of everything but that this tracery meant her presence, where he now bent, hardly half an hour before. He swung, after a moment's keen scrutiny, into his saddle, with fresh resolve. Pressed by the rising fury of the wind, the wayfarers had become from this point, De Spain saw too plainly, hardly more than fugitives. Good ground to the left, where their hope of safety lay, had been obliterated. Their tracks wandered on the open desert like those who, losing courage, lose their course, in the confusion and fear of the impending peril.

And with this increasing uncertainty in their direction vanished De Spain's last hopes of tracking them. The wind swept the desert now as a hurricane sweeps the open sea, snatching the

fallen snow from the face of the earth as the sea-gale, flattening the face of the waters, rips the foam from the frantic waves to drive it in wild, scudding fragments across them.

De Spain, urging his horse forward, unbuckled his ride holster, threw away the scabbard, and holding the weapon up in one hand, fired shot after shot at measured intervals to attract the attention of the two he sought. He exhausted his rifle ammunition without eliciting any answer. The wind drove with a roar against which even a ride report could hardly carry, and the snow swept down the slanks in a mad blast. Flakes torn by the fury of the gale were stiffened by the bitter wind into powdered ice that stung horse and rider. Casting away the useless carbine, and pressing his horse to the limit of her strength and endurance, the unyielding pursuer rode in great, coiling circles into the storm, to cut in, if possible, ahead of its victims, firing shot upon shot from his revolver, and putting his ear intently against the wind for the faint hope of an answer.

Suddenly the Lady stumbled and, as he cruelly reined her, slid helpless and scrambling along the face of a flat rock. De Spain, leaping from her back, steadied her trembling and looked underfoot. The mare had struck the rock of the upper lava bed. Drawing his revolver, he fired signal shots from where he stood. It could not be far, he knew, from the junction of the two great desert trails—the Calabasas road and the gap road. He felt sure Nan could not have got much north of this, for he had ridden in desperation to get abreast of or beyond her, and if she were south, where, he asked, in the name of God, could she be?

He climbed again into the saddle—the cold was gripping his limbs—and, watching the rocky landmarks narrowly, tried to circle the dead waste of the half-buried flow. With chilled, awkward fingers he fiddled the revolver again and rode on, discharging it every minute, and listening—hoping against hope for an answer. It was when he had almost completed, as well as he could compute, the wide circuit he had set out on, that a faint shot answered his continuing signals.

With the sound of that shot and those that followed it his courage all came back. But he had yet to trace through the confusion of the wind and the blinding snow the direction of the answering reports.

Higher and higher he rode, this way, and that, testing out the location of the slowly repeated shots, and signaling at intervals in return. Slowly and gingerly he kept on shooting, listening, wheeling and advancing until, as he raised his revolver to fire it again, a cry close at hand came out of the storm. It was a woman's voice borne on the wind. Riding swiftly to the left, a horse's outline revealed itself at moments in the driving snow ahead.

De Spain cried out, and from behind the furious curtain heard his name, loudly called. He pushed his stumbling horse on. The dim outline of a second horse, the background of a wagon, a storm-beaten man—all this passed his eyes unheeded. They were bent on a girlish figure running toward him as he slid stiffly from the saddle. The next instant Nan was in his arms.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The Truth.

With the desperation of a joy born of despair she laid her burning cheek hysterically against his cheek. She rained kisses on his ice-crusted brow and snow-beaten eyes. Her arms held him rigidly. He could not move nor speak till she would let him. Transformed, this mountain girl who gave herself so shyly, forgot everything. Her words crowded on his ears. She repeated his name in an ecstasy of welcome, drew down his lips, laughed, rejoiced, knew no shamefacedness and no restraint—she was one freed from the stroke of a descending knife. A moment before she had faced death alone; it was still death she faced—she realized this—but it was death, at least, together, and her joy and tears rose from her heart in one stream.

De Spain comforted her, quieted her, cut away one of the coats from his horse, slipped it over her shoulders, increased her in the heavy fur, and turned his eyes to Duke.

The old man's set, square face rendered nothing of implacability to the dangers confronting him. De Spain looked for none of that. He had known the Morgan record too long, and faced the Morgan men too often, to fancy they would flinch at the drum-beat of death.

The two men, in the deadly, driving snow, eyed each other. Out of the old man's deep-set eyes burned the resistance of a hundred storms faced before. But he was caught now like a wolf in a trap, and he knew he had little to hope for, little to fear. As De Spain regarded him, something like pity may have mixed with his hatred. The old outlaw was thinly clad. His open throat, was beaten with snow, and, standing beside the wagon, he held the team reins in a bare hand. De Spain cut the other coat from his saddle and held it out. Duke pretended not to see, and, when not longer equal to keeping up the pretense, shook his head.

"Take it," said De Spain curtly.

"No."

"Take it, I say. You and I will settle our affairs when we get Nan out of this," he insisted.

"De Spain!" Duke's voice, as was its wont, cracked like a pistol. "I can say all I've got to say to you right here."

"No."

"Yes," cried the old man.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

KIDNEY REMEDY HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

There is no medicine which we handle that gives such good results as your Swamp-Root. Many of our customers have informed us at different times that they have derived great benefit from its use.

There was one case in particular which attracted a great deal of attention in this neighborhood early last Spring, as the gentleman's life was despaired of and two doctors treating him for liver and kidney trouble were unable to give him any relief. Finally a specialist from St. Louis was called in but failed to do him any good. I at last induced him to try your Swamp-Root and after taking it for three months he was attending to his business as usual and is now entirely well. This case has been the means of creating an increased demand for your Swamp-Root with us.

Very truly yours,
L. A. RICHARDSON, Druggist.
May 27, 1916.

Marine, Illinois.
Prove What Swamp-Root Will Do For You
Send ten cents to Dr. Kilmer & Co., Binghamton, N. Y., for a sample size bottle. It will convince anyone. You will also receive a booklet of valuable information, telling about the kidneys and bladder. When writing, be sure and mention this paper. Regular fifty-cent and one-dollar size bottles for sale at all drug stores.—Adv.

Taking Antifal.
She was precocious beyond what would be expected from one just past five summers. She lived in a family where one of the members had been taking "flesh reducer."

A boy, wearing a castoff hat several numbers too large, which had been puckered to make it fit, was passing along the street. She called out, shrilly:

"Oh, mamma, Johnny has been taking antifal. He had to tighten his hat band."—Indianapolis News.

COVETED BY ALL
but possessed by few—a beautiful head of hair. If yours is streaked with gray, or is harsh and stiff, you can restore it to its former beauty and luster by using "La Creole" Hair Dressing. Price \$1.00.—Adv.

The Lost Dog.
Among war stories sent from the battle front in France to a London newspaper is this one: "We could do nothing. We were trapped," said the brigadier, who was taken with his whole staff. The brigadier wept a little. He confessed to the humiliation of being captured with such little loss among his men. "We thought the Vimy ridge impregnable," he said. But his greatest grief was not for the defeat, or for the capture or sufferings of his men. "My little dog!" he said again and again. "Has anyone seen my little dog? It has been with me ever since the beginning of the war." He had lost his little dog when he had come out of his dugout and held up his hands, and then came down with his mob of men.

Was Right First Time.
It was little Jane's third birthday and brother Will was taking advantage of the privilege it gave, at which Jane cried lustily.

"What's the matter, Jane?" asked mamma, coming on the scene.

"Brother's a regular 'sprize fighter, he is," said Jane.

After mamma had explained the custom, she exclaimed: "Well, he 'sprizes folks, anyway."

Emporium of the Near Future.
"Have you any anthracite coal today?"

"The jewelry department is on the fourth floor."

How About It?
"I dreamed last night that I proposed to a beautiful girl."

"And what did I say?"

Just the same, if it hadn't been for woman's curiosity Moses never would have been found in the bulrushes.



A Wise Move
is to change from
coffee to
POSTUM
before the harm
is done.
"There's a Reason"